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AUTHOR Beyer, Margaret; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The Hamden Mental Health Service staff collaborated with the police on a joint research project concerning runaway youth. The data suggest that adolescents who run away come from broken homes where disruption during preadolescence has been associated with parental separation and remarriage. These adolescents often exhibit symptoms of depression and impulsive behavior. Many adolescents run away primarily to escape from home, to experiment with their own autonomy, or to manipulate their parents into effecting changes which would make the relationship more satisfactory. Through planning, implementing, and interpreting this preliminary study, the community has benefited in the following areas: (1) operational and training procedures in the police department have been systematized and upgraded; (2) interagency cooperation has been promoted; and (3) service for adolescents and their families has been improved. (Author/LAA)

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RUNAWAY YOUTHS: FAMILIES IN CONFLICT[1]

Margaret Beyer
Yale University

Thomas A. Reid
Hamden Mental Health Service

Susan A. Holt
Hamden Mental Health Service

Donald M. Quinlan
Yale University

In most states running away is a juvenile offense for adolescents under the age of sixteen. According to the FBI, as many as a million children run away each year in the United States, a figure which has increased 60 percent in the last four years.

The limited psychological literature on adolescents who run away from home reflects two disparate perspectives. Some view running away as indicative of psychopathology, including neuroses, impulsive, delinquent behavior, mental deficiency, low self-esteem and sociopathic tendencies. Others (while not denying the possible importance of psychopathological origins) describe running away as a response to situational difficulties, including parental punitiveness and rejection and pressures from puberty. The diversity in the two perspectives seems primarily to be the consequence of methodological differences related to the source of the sample (that is, whether runaways are studied in the justice, mental health, or welfare systems).

Studies from the juvenile court and correctional facilities consistently focus on the delinquent and psychologically disturbed behavior of adolescent runaways. Early investigations from this perspective described typical runaways as delinquent, with low intelligence and from a low-income family often broken by divorce or desertion (Aichorn, 1955; Armstrong, 1937; Burt, 1944). More recently Stierlin (1972) distinguished runaways from other delinquents along the dimensions of lower tolerance of frustration and poorer impulse

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control. Jenkins (1969) and Robins and O'Neal (1959) seemed to be in agreement with Joos, Debuyst and Sepulchre-Cassiers (1970) in summarizing the psychopathology of runaways as "more neurotic, anxious, depressed and indecisive" than controls or other delinquents.

The clinical view, however, is challenged by investigators emphasizing situational factors. Intolerable home situations and parent separations are factors which may intensify the child's fear of rejection and abandonment and make coping with anger and frustration more difficult for the child (Foster, 1962; Lowry, 1941; Goldmeier & Dean, 1972). Shellow, Schamp, Liebow and Unger (1967) in studying over 1,000 adolescents also indicated the importance of situational factors. Results showed that adolescents who ran away (a) reported conflict at home; (b) came from broken homes; (c) had academic difficulty and more absences in school; (d) did not have a history of delinquency; and (e) had moved at least once. Adolescents with repeated runaway incidents tended to remain away from home longer, have more family conflict, especially about school problems, and had a history of delinquency. Shellow, et al., concluded that their sample consisted of two groups: a minority with individual and/or family pathology and the majority who were not as disturbed.

Due to the exploratory nature of these studies and the increasing number of runaway youths in the Hamden, Connecticut community, the Hamden Mental Health Service, the Hamden Police Department and several other community agencies became interested in a more comprehensive investigation of the runaway problem. The Hamden Mental Health Service (HMHS), located in a suburban community of 50,000 in southern Connecticut, is a child and family counseling agency, which also emphasizes consultation to other helping resources (e.g. schools, visiting nurses, police). With permission of the Juvenile Court HMHS initially reviewed police missing person reports to establish the scope

of the problem. The results of this problem assessment were made available to agencies interested in the prevention of running away or involved with intervention after such episodes.

Information obtained through police sources provided only a limited demographic sketch of the runaway problem in Hamden. The majority of runaways are in the 14-17 age group. There is relative parity of males and females, not reported in previously published studies. Eighty percent were back home in less than a week. Half returned voluntarily and half were brought back. Over two thirds of the sample were returned to the custody of their families without specific recommendations for social or court intervention.

Because the information regarding such important matters as the reason for the runaway was not consistently recorded on the police reports, it became clear that a formal in-depth investigation was needed. The present study became possible when a review of HMHS records indicated that thirty families who had experienced a runaway episode had been or currently were receiving treatment at Hamden Mental Health Service.

In addition to the importance of the findings themselves, the HMHS staff had other, more broadly defined objectives for collaborating with the police on a joint research project which included (a) demonstrating to police methods of systematic examination of problems; (b) emphasizing the possibilities for service available in police departments; and (c) developing a project on which many service agencies could work cooperatively.

Methodology

Subjects

Of the 30 families seen at HMHS, 18 had reported the runaway incident to the police while the remaining twelve were known only to HMHS. A letter was mailed to each family describing the study and requesting their participation

in interviews. Follow-up telephone calls were made to each family to arrange appointment times. Ultimately, 13 teenagers and 15 parents in 16 families agreed to participate in the study.

For purposes of this study running away was defined by parents reporting a missing child to the Police Department or the HMHS. The age range of adolescent subjects in the study was 12-18 years, including eight 14 and 15 year olds and a median age of 15. There were nine females (60%) and six males (40%). Eleven of the subjects had been referred to HMHS specifically because of the runaway episode(s). School-related problems were the next most frequently mentioned difficulties leading to referral to HMHS (six subjects). In evaluating the seriousness of their problems, HMHS clinicians viewed six adolescents as experiencing "normal adolescent crises," seven as "somewhat abnormal," and two as "extremely pathological."

Procedure

Separate data gathering sessions (two hours each) with different interviewers were held for parent(s) and teenager. Each family member also completed a paper and pencil questionnaire following the interview. Additional questionnaire data about each family was obtained from school social workers and HMHS clinicians.

The three investigators attempted to insure a uniform interview procedure through detailed interview schedules and role playing before the study began. An attempt was made to assign interviewers to families on the basis of two criteria: (a) the HMHS clinician did not interview clients previously known to him; and (b) the same interviewer should not interview parent(s) and child of the same family. Six exceptions were made in which an investigator interviewed both parent and child in the same family because of time constraints on the other investigators.

Instruments

Two parallel interview schedules were developed for use with parents and adolescents. Each interview was designed to occupy one and one half hours including specific questions about the following areas:

1. History of problem development
   a. in the family
   b. in school
   c. with peers
2. Previous use of social services
3. Reasons for running away
4. The experience of running away
5. Consequences of running away

The parent and teenager questionnaires provided a check on the consistency of a sample of responses from the interview as well as information in a more quantifiable form derived from forced choice techniques. Areas examined with this instrument were demographic data, family conflict, runaway causation, teenager's affect and school activity. Questionnaire data obtained from school personnel included days absent, grades, previous referral to school counseling services, and assessment of cause for running away. HMHS workers responded to specific questions about treatment modality used in each case, major family problems, peer and school information, teenager's affect and an assessment of the cause of running away and the consequences desired by teenager.

Coding and Analyses

An interview code was developed from the interview schedule after all the sessions were completed. Two investigators coded each interview separately, and the sum of their ratings was used in subsequent analyses.

Results

Family Characteristics and Associated Conflicts

Information about family income revealed a pattern representative of the Hamden community, i.e., a wide range from $3,000 to more than $15,000

annually with concentration in the middle income area (median = $12,000). The families were geographically quite stabilized: parents in 12 of the families were born in New England with six being natives of the New Haven area. But 59% of the sample of the teenagers moved into or within Hamden during the last seven years (mean = 1.7 years ago), the majority of whom reported disruption from changing residences. Significant positive correlates of moving were dislike of stepparent, desire to manipulate parents by running away, anticipated length of runaway, fear of parental reaction to running away and anger reported by parents upon teenager's return.[2]

Perhaps the most notable finding on family history was that ten of the families (63%) had experienced parental death, separation, divorce and often remarriage. Three families reported separations, four reported separation and remarriage and two reported remarriage and more than one separation. At the time of the study all but one of the teenagers were living with their natural mothers, but only a third were living with their natural fathers.

Broken homes and remarriage had substantial consequences for the teenagers. HMHS clinicians reported that disagreements related to remarriage were a major problem in seven families and that single parent difficultues adversely affected five others. Teenagers' problems with stepparents were significantly correlated with a number of factors including: (a) disagreements about the teenager's dating, personal appearance and cigarette smoking; (b) the teenager's report of severe punishment as a cause of running away; and (c) parental report of being angry upon teenager's return from a runaway episode. In every case, the relationship between runaways and stepparents

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[2]All the correlations reported in this paper are at least at the $p < .05$ level. When proportions are reported, they reflect 13 teenagers, 15 parents, clinician questionnaires on 15 families and school reports on 14 teenagers. In cases where a comparison of teenager and parent perspectives is made, 12 family units are used as the base.

was extremely conflicted. The incidence of broken homes is positively correlated with the number of runaway occurrences and conflict between mother and teenager. From these findings it is apparent that major disruption as a result of change in family composition and moving seem to be associated with running away and with other problems which predate running away.

Conflict: Duration and Content. About half of the parents (7) and half of the adolescents (7) in the study report that strong disagreements have existed in their families for two years or longer. Parents and teenagers agreed on the importance of some issues causing family conflict: 67% of teenagers and 60% of parents described hours of returning home as a problem, 50% of teenagers and 40% of parents described number of nights allowed out as a problem, and 42% of teenagers and 40% of parents described parental remarriage as a problem. The parents and teenagers did not always concur on the topic of conflicts. Parents and teenagers attributed different importance to school performance and teenagers' friends in family disagreements.

Attendance at and grades in school emerged as an important facet of the family relationship. Reports from the school indicated that the mean number of days absent in this sample had increased from ten days three years ago to 50 days in the past year, and that over a two-year period the average grades in the sample had decreased. In nine of the cases (69%) the school social worker indicated a discrepancy between poor grades and other measures of intelligence. There were disparate reports of the importance of school performance as an area of family conflict. HMHS clinicians report that eight teenagers (62%) have relatively severe school adjustment problems, and seven of the parents concurred. Nevertheless, only two of the teenagers indicated that school difficulties were important. Only one-third of the teenagers report being at all dissatisfied with their grades as compared to 80% of the

parents. Half of the parents as compared to 15% of the teenagers view school performance as a major source of conflict at home. Half of the teenagers as compared to 80% of the parents are at least somewhat concerned about school behavior problems. Apparently, parents regard school problems more seriously than do the adolescents. Care should be taken in interpreting these findings, however, since it is possible that family conflict could cause school difficulties as well as be caused by poor school performance.

In contrast to their parents, 67% teenagers described disagreement about their choice of friends as an important problem, while 73% of parents did not seem to feel that the adolescent's friends created family disputes of significance.

Teenager report of family conflict, regardless of its content, is significantly correlated with other aspects of teenager and parent behavior: feeling that parents do not care about him/her; a lack of solutions for unhappiness; considerable anger; expectation of punishment upon returning home from runaway; and negatively correlated with parents blaming themselves for teenagers' problems. It also appears that conflict with both parents is associated with escape as a desired consequence of running away. Conflict with mother is positively correlated with the teenager seeing parents as the cause of unhappiness, sneaking to avoid being caught for breaking rules, disagreements about school performance and parental complicity in teenagers' activities, and negatively correlated with parental discussion of running away with teenager, parental insight into problems, and parental familiarity with teenager. Conflict with father or stepfather is positively correlated with returning home because of missing family and running out of resources.

In viewing these findings, there is a strong suggestion that running away is one of the symptoms of unstable and conflict-laden family situations.

Individual Dynamics

A number of questions in the interview and questionnaire were addressed to the assessment of impulsivity and depression in the teenager.

Impulsivity. Undercontrolled or impulsive behavior seemed to be characteristic of some of the runaways. Seven teenagers reported that they ran away on the spur of the moment with no planning. Five families reported that their teenagers have run away only once while an additional five report ten or more episodes (including two cases of more than 25 occurrences). Few took money or clothes; most reported having given little thought to destination. Several spent at least the first night with friends attempting to bridge the gap between home and being "on the road."

The teenager's impulsivity was assessed from self-report, parent report and school and clinician report of specific behavior. Despite the low intercorrelations among these measures, the HMHS clinician's assessment of the teenager's impulsivity--which seems to have the greatest reliability--has a number of significant correlates: number of older siblings, family disagreements about clothing/hair and riding in cars, teenager's anger, number of runaway incidents, proving self as a desired consequence of running away, academic problems, distance of running away, and duration of major problems were all positively correlated with more impulsive departures. A significant negative correlation was found between HMHS assessment of teenager's impulsivity and teenager report of amount of planning the run away. Teenagers' report of amount of planning of the runaway also correlated positively with the HMHS assessment of the teenager's awareness of the consequences of his/her actions. Additional correlates of impulsivity as assessed by parents include: the frequency that teenagers do things just to break the rules, the teenager's willingness to accept responsibilities, and academic problems in

school. In summary, for a substantial subgroup of the teenagers the runaway behavior could be labelled "impulsive"--an event with little planning.

Depression. Depression also appeared as a frequent characteristic of these teenagers. In this context depression refers to feelings of unhappiness in contrast to a more restricted clinical definition of depression. More than half of the runaways report feeling unhappy at least once weekly and three report feeling unhappy every day. Parent and interview coder assessment suggest that the teenager's depression is related to long-term problems, teenager's considering running away without doing so, teenager's limited awareness of the consequences of his/her own actions, desire to manipulate parents by running away, unwillingness to accept responsibilities, amount parents feel threatened by teenager, the teenager's blaming of parents for problems, and the lack of clinical improvement reported by HMHS staff. It appeared that depression was a partial result of feelings of rejection related to family separation. Although the self-report of depression may not be reliable, it is correlated positively with teenager's self-report of impulsivity and negatively with the degree of planning of run away as assessed by parent. For many of the teenagers, running away was not only "impulsive," but also followed a history of depression.

Experience of running away

It is apparent that running away was envisioned as quite different from the actual experience. Many reported that the experience of running away was less exciting, made them feel less independent and was more frightening or boring than they had anticipated. Half report experiencing pressing survival needs (including shelter and food), which only one teenager had anticipated. Twenty five percent planned to stay away more than a month, including some who thought they would never return home. Nevertheless, 50%

remained in the New Haven area. Forty percent of the runaways voluntarily called their parents within two days of leaving home, possibly indicating some ambivalence about their decision to leave. Slightly more than half of the runaways returned voluntarily because they ran out of resources, missed their families or believed that running away had achieved its desired effect.

Despite the lack of planning and the discrepancy between the anticipated and actual experience of running away, the teenagers articulated objectives they had in leaving home. From their report of expected consequences of running away it is apparent that many of the teenagers wanted to cause changes in their lives by running away. Most anticipated influencing their parents by running away. The desire to hurt, scare and manipulate parents are significantly intercorrelated and seem to be related to considerable disagreements about such issues as school performance, but also returning because of missing family.

Some teenagers anticipated changing their lives by gaining autonomy. Testing out independence and proving self were correlated desired consequences of running away and both were significantly correlated with parent concern about school problems, parent blaming self for problems, and degree of planning the runaway incident.

In addition, some teenagers report that their major intention was to escape the home situation by running away. Teenagers wanting to escape report more conflict with their father/stepfather, seem to be pressured more by their parents about school, and threaten running away before they leave.

On the average the teenagers reported that running away was somewhat helpful; the mean parent response was that it was not at all helpful. Two of the teenagers thought in retrospect, however, that running away was foolish while six of the teenagers have considered running away again.

Discussion

The data suggest that adolescents who run away typically come from broken homes where disruption during preadolescence has been associated with parental separation and remarriage. These adolescents also often exhibit symptoms of depression and impulsive behavior. Many adolescents run away primarily to escape from the home, while others leave to experiment with their own autonomy or to manipulate their parents into changes which would make the relationship more satisfactory.

Some parents had considerable insight into family difficulties and understood running away as the adolescent's method of problem-solving. These parents seemed more familiar with their teenagers and recognized ways that problems of the parents had affected the children. However, a majority of parents appeared to lack understanding about their role in the teenager's problems and identified him/her as the 'sick' one in the family needing treatment. These parents were having difficulty handling their own problems and saw the teenager as an additional burden. Most felt that their teenager was uncontrollable, and that limiting his/her behavior was impossible because the teenager would ignore the rules or leave the situation. Parents expressed frustration at their powerlessness; they resorted to severe punishments to control the teenager, and these were frequently a contributing factor to a runaway episode. Subsequently some parents resigned themselves to a policy of noninterference hoping this would lead to improvement in the teenager's behavior. Many parents commented that their teenager "was a perfect child," until a certain age when a dramatic change in behavior had occurred. Few parents understood the causes of this change, although it often correlated with parental separation or moving to a new residence. By their hope for a magical return to good behavior, parents seemed oblivious to the seriousness of the teenager's concerns.

Family constellation and interaction seemed to be the most noteworthy dimension related to teenagers running away. Conflict within the family was often cited by teenagers as the immediate precipitating event of a runaway. Areas of conflict, however, seem to be relatively benign topics common to most families, e.g. hours allowed out, choice of friends, personal appearance. Perhaps this inability to concur about problems is the most significant causal factor in running away.

Teenager's objectives in running away may be summarized in three categories: (1) escaping; (2) experiencing excitement and independence; and (3) producing change at home. This last group seemed to be more aware of the consequences of their actions and willing to gamble by leaving home in order to convince their parents of their serious desire for change. These teenagers frequently return home voluntarily because they miss their families. They may be the ones who mature the most from the experience of running away since they usually run away only once and report improvement after their return.

Typically, running away was a spur of the moment decision involving little planning. Precipitating incidents seem most frequently to be family disputes where the teenager felt humiliated, uncontrollably angry, rejected or unable to tolerate parental restrictions any longer. However, it is not clear whether these runaways could be called more impulsive than other delinquents, other clients at HMHS or non-runaways.

Most of the teenagers were seen by themselves, their parents and HMHS clinicians as depressed. The more depressed seemed less aware of the consequences of their own actions. Most seemed to have some technique for reducing unhappiness, but some felt that they had no solutions other than running away. The remainder acted unconcerned about their problems at home and school as if they were attempting to disguise their depression.

It is difficult to determine relative disturbance among the adolescents in the sample. Some have more home problems than others; some have parents obviously more unstable than others; some are more depressed than others; a few have been getting professional help for years, but for the majority running away was the most serious sign of disturbance. Many of the teenagers seemed to have profited from running away and have achieved desired improvements at home. Others seem more helpless and insignificant changes resulted from running away.

Impact of the Study

Planning, implementing, and interpreting this preliminary study on Hamden runaways have produced community benefits in at least three areas: (1) operational and training procedures in the police department have been systematized and upgraded; (2) interagency cooperation has been promoted; and (3) service for adolescents and their families has been improved.

Police reports were the first source of data in the present study. Results indicated that important information for understanding the problem was not routinely incorporated into the report. Through increased sensitivity to the issues involved in the runaway episode, the Hamden Police Department officers working with young people have improved their interviewing and information gathering skills and have begun to supplement systematically reports with essential information. During the course of the study the police officers also became more familiar with other community resources and have begun to use these services (e.g. HMHS, school social workers, visiting nurses) as sources of referral for runaways and other juvenile offenders.

Certain advantages of the systematic investigation of a population have been recognized by the police--namely when the characteristics of a group are known, methods can be developed to deal optimally and consistently with

the problem. One outcome of this process has been the establishment of more specific criteria for the disposition of cases.

Various other community agencies have also been taking an active interest in the runaway problem through the Hamden Coordinating Council (HCC). HCC is an association of service agencies meeting for the primary purpose of identifying service gaps in Hamden and filling them with the coordianted work efforts of existing organizations. Since half of the runaways never leave Hamden, a HCC subcommittee has been formed to study the need for an emergency residential placement program for these runaways and resources which might make the program possible. This subcommittee will make use of the results of this preliminary study and subsequent information on runaways in choosing a course of action.

The study of runaways has also increased the focus of the service community on individuals and families experiencing runaway episodes. Hence there is a greater awareness of associated and predisposing problems which has led to the availability of increased counseling from a variety of organizations including the police, court, schools, mental health, and clergy. More systematic information which will be forthcoming should be extremely helpful in uniting community services and citizens to provide useful interventions.

Further Study

Exploration of two areas suggested by this study is currently in progress:

(1) A more extensive investigation of the families of runaway adolescents and of the causation and consequences of running away.

(2) A more intensive investigation of runaway adolescents in comparison to their non runaway siblings on the dimensions of depression, self-esteem, family relationships and impulsivity.

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